Greg Hundermark

Mrs. Dianne Krause

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Plagiarism & 'Digital Natives'

While plagiarism is a practice that is commonly discouraged by K-12 institutions across The United States, a national ranking of plagiarism incidents released this month by *Turnitin* reveals a disturbing reality: college students are plagiarizing and the most common forms involve little to no subtlety (Carter). This month, *Turnitin,* a company that sells educational software designed to identify plagiarism, released a ranking of plagiarism incidents, and the most common form involves nothing more than the verbatim copying and pasting of research papers (Carter). Carter explains that while nearly every school has an academic policy that discourages plagiarism, students still intentionally plagiarize, and they are frequent offenders.

In addition to identifying the most common infraction of plagiarism, the national report by *Turnitin* also classifies nine additional forms of plagiarism commonly employed by students. According to *Turnitin*, the second most severe act of plagiarism is "CTRL+C", or "the act of changing key words and phrases but retaining the essential content of the course in a paper" (Instructor Insights). The third act, "FIND-REPLACE" is "the act of changing key words and phrases but retaining the essential content of the source in a paper" (Instructor Insights). The fourth act, "REMIX", involves "paraphrasing from other sources and making the content fit together seamlessly" (Instructor Insights). While the fourth act is considered to be problematic, educators generally consider it to be less severe than its predecessors since it is often regarded as a reflection of students' inexperience with writing research papers (Instructor Insights). While the fifth act is regarded in a similar light, it also blurs the lines of what constitutes plagiarism.

Dubbed "Recycle", the fifth act is "borrowing generously from one's own previous work without citation; To self plagiarize" (Instructor Insights). *Turnitin* explains that "Recycling" registers a low problematic score by educators because it involves more original effort (as opposed to original writing) than some of the other acts on the list (Instructor Insights). While *Turnitin* never raises the question of whether or not this act should truly be considered plagiarism, it should most certainly be reconsidered.

By definition, plagiarism is defined as "an act or instance of using or closely imitating the language and thoughts of another author without authorization and the representation of that author's work as one's own, as by not crediting the original author". An alternative definition states that plagiarism is "a piece of writing or other work reflecting such unauthorized use or imitation". In the first definition, plagiarism requires that the imitation be that of another author, not of one's self. If a student "recycles" work of their own authorship, it may very well be a representation of their lethargy, but it does not conflict with the term's definition. Similarly, the alternative definition of plagiarism requires there to be an "unauthorized use or imitation", which is inapplicable when "recycling" a work of self-authorship.

In the latter half of *Turnitin's* list, the question of students' intentions becomes much more uncertain. For example, the sixth act, "HYBRID", is "the act of combining perfectly cited sources with copied passages - without citation - in one paper" (Instructor Insights). The seventh act, "MASHUP", is "a paper that represents a mix of copied material from several different sources without proper citation" (Instructor Insights). While both could easily be deemed as intentional acts of plagiarism, students could just as readily claim ignorance in regard to proper citation practices. These instances of plagiarism, not unlike the rest, raise the question of how educators can minimize the frequency and severity of such infractions.

*Turnitin* proposes that educators and administrators consider several different suggestions when designing and enforcing their academic policies. First, the intent should be considered. *Turnitin* argues that there's an age-old policy that the punishment should fit the crime, and so it should be no different when it comes to plagiarism. Instead of using a one size fits all approach, which many schoolsdo, educators should receive guidance in terms of developing appropriate academic responses (Instructor Insights). For example, highly problematic and severe infractions of plagiarism should warrant more extreme responses than infractions of lesser severity. Second, students should be informed of the different types and severities of plagiarism infractions. As a result, students will less frequently claim that their infractions were unintentional and they will also be aware that their instructors are aware of the ways in which they may inappropriately make use of information (Instructor Insights). For instance, act eight is known as the "404 ERROR", which is when "a written piece includes citations to non-existent or inaccurate information about sources" (Instructor Insights). While this is certainly a more crafty form of plagiarism, informing students of an awareness of such a technique should deter them from using it as frequently.

The final two acts of plagiarism reaffirm what I believe is truly at the heart of this matter, which is that students and educators need to better educated about how to effectively write and make use of information in the digital age. Act nine is known as the "AGGREGATOR", which includes proper citation, but contains almost no original work (Instructor Insights). The tenth act is known as "RE-TWEET", and that is when a paper includes proper citation, but relies too closely on the text's original wording and/or structure (Instructor Insights).

While several of the ten types of plagiarism are problematic and rank high in terms of severity, the latter infractions are an indication that students need to be better educated in terms of how to avoid plagiarism while effectively communicating their message. Through my experience as an English teacher, I have seen a large number of plagiarism infractions. "AGGREGATORS" and "RE-TWEETERS" are the most common infractions I see over the course of the year. Through self-reflection, I attribute this to a lack of direct instruction and modeling of how to add unique commentary and voice to a composition. Admittedly, there is also minimal instruction of the different types of infractions for students. As an instructional technology enthusiast, I will value and implement the suggestions *Turnitin* proposed in their national ranking report so that our district has a system in place to minimize the amount of plagiarism infractions and increase the integrity of our students' work.

Works Cited

Carter, Dennis. "The Top 10 Ways College Students Plagiarize." *The Top 10 Ways College Students Plagiarize*. ECampus News, 15 May 2012. Web. 03 June 2012. <http://www.ecampusnews.com/top-news/the-top-10-ways-college-students-plagiarize/print/>.

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